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Developing a common standard for authentic restaurants

制定正宗餐厅的共同标准

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the paradox of authenticity versus standardisation. It examines the features that constitute restaurant authenticity and determines whether these can be standardised within an alliance of top restaurants to reap the benefits of commonalities among the restaurants. We determine the features of authenticity by examining the literature, by interviewing owners and managers of alliance restaurants and by means of a consumer survey. The results show several discrepancies. Combining these three data sources allowed us to distinguish between essential and peripheral features of authenticity. This distinction can help to define a standard for restaurant authenticity, specifying minimum levels for essential features of authenticity.

摘要

本文研究了原创性与标准性的矛盾。我们研究了决定餐厅原创性的主要特征，并判定这些特征是否能够在顶级餐厅同盟中标准化，从而让这些餐厅从标准化提炼出的共性中获益。我们通过文献调研、采访同盟餐厅中的业主和经理、以及对消费者进行调研来确定这些特征。研究的结果显示了一些差异性。通过结合这三组数据，我们得以区分原创性的本质和外部特征。这种区分有助于定义原创性的标准，并且为其本质特征设定最低标准。

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Introduction

Authenticity may enhance customers' restaurant experience (Jang, Ha, & Park, 2012; Parsa, Self, Njite, & King, 2005; Pine & Gilmore, 2000; Tsai & Lu, 2012). Consumers assign higher ratings to restaurants regarded as authentic, even after controlling for restaurant quality (Kovács, Carroll, & Lehman, 2013). Standardisation is another trend in the restaurant industry. This industry is becoming highly competitive and international restaurant chains have expanded into national markets. Standardisation could provide many benefits such as economies of scale. But could standardisation be applied to authentic restaurants?

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Could they reap the benefits of standardisation without affecting authenticity? Authentic refers to 'real, reliable, trustworthy, original, first hand, true in substance, and prototypical as opposed to copied, reproduced or done the same way as an original' (Ram, Björk, & Weidenfeld, 2016, p. 111). The two concepts, authenticity and standardisation, seem to be incompatible.

Zeng, Go, and de Vries (2012) state that

authenticity and standardization represent contradictory forces and might therefore pose a managerial paradox. In particular, establishing a sense of uniqueness while simultaneously possessing criteria that are common among the individual members of a restaurant group can easily lead to such a paradox.

However, they argue that a combination of authenticity and standardisation is feasible and can be beneficial. One of the companies they investigated expanded the number of their restaurants by copying authentic dishes and processes, and by developing joint chef training programmes. However, a restaurant offers more than just food. It offers an entire service package, and authenticity is related to all the features of this package, such as the staff, their behaviour, the building, the furniture and the music. This paper aims to answer the following questions: Which features constitute authenticity, can these be standardised, and what would be the impacts of doing so?

We answer these questions by exploring the feasibility of developing a common standard for an alliance of top restaurants that claim to be authentic. At first sight, these restaurants are unique. However, they could share certain features so that customers can recognise that the restaurant is a member of the alliance, but still retain its authenticity. In other words, the alliance could standardise certain features. Our empirical research shows that this is indeed a feasible option. Authenticity is not hindered because the standard sets performance requirements rather than prescribing solutions. This paper contributes to the literature by showing how the concepts of authenticity and standardisation can be combined.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. We first review the literature on features of authenticity and examine the concepts of authenticity and standardisation. Next, we describe our case study research. We identify the key features of restaurant authenticity by interviewing entrepreneurs and managers of restaurants that are part of an alliance of top restaurants in the Netherlands, and by means of a consumer survey. We then propose a standard for authenticity which distinguishes between essential and peripheral features. We end with a discussion of our findings, limitations and suggestions for future research.

Literature review

Authenticity

In tourism research, authenticity is described as a form of reality, that is, a sense of the genuine and the sincere (MacCannell, 1973; Sharpley, 1994; Wang, 1999). It implies a corporate culture anchored in a 'staying true to oneself'. Authenticity refers to the 'real thing' and serves as a label that attaches an identity to an object, subject or person. Restaurant authenticity has been extensively researched, but little attention has focused on what makes a restaurant authentic (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Wang and Mattila (2015)

distinguish the physical setting, service providers and other customers, and Zeng, Zhao, and Sun (2014) mention enterprise name, decoration style, environmental layout, material procurement, design of dishes and waiters.

Wang (1999) distinguishes two basic forms of authenticity, based on two separate issues, namely tourist experiences and 'toured objects'. Existential authenticity is activity-related (tourist experience) which may be personal or shared among people who experience the same. Authenticity related to toured objects includes 'objective authenticity', which refers to the authenticity of originals, and 'constructive authenticity', projected on toured objects by tourists or tourism producers (Wang, 1999). Belhassen, Caton, and Stewart (2008) add that perceived authenticity is not just subjective, but that it also has an objective side. They conclude that authenticity can operate between these extremes, and it can be 'negotiated' between suppliers and consumers (Adams, 1996; Taheri, Farrington, Curran, & O'Gorman, 2017).

Authenticity does not only indicate that the object has to be original or genuine, but it can also be seen by customers as being unique and therefore authentic. This is the post-modern approach to authenticity (Wang, 1999). Disneyland, for example, is not genuine, but it is unique and therefore authentic. Highly standardised restaurants chains such as McDonald's and Starbucks may be perceived as authentic because they offer an 'authentic' Western experience (Rosenbaum, Cheng, & Wong, 2016). The postmodern approach often refers to 'hyper-reality': the transformation of a simulation or hype into something that is taken as real by the beholder (Baudrillard, 1983; Eco, 1986; Solomon & Englis, 1994). Consumers seem to develop their own interpretations of authenticity (Lu, Gursoy, & Lu, 2015). Research that distinguishes between different groups of people may help us to understand differences in authenticity claims (Martin, 2009). The distinction between authentic and inauthentic can be socially or personally constructed (Grayson & Martinec, 2004) or change in the eyes of the beholder (Lu & Fine, 1995; Wood & Munoz, 2006). Then authenticity is not hidden in an object, person or performance, but is a claim made by or for someone, something or for a performance, and is accepted or rejected by relevant others (Peterson, 1997).

To achieve customer satisfaction, a company should know what its customers need and want (Oliver, 1997). A gap between expectation and actual experience may lead to dissatisfaction (Pine & Gilmore, 2000; Wood & Munoz, 2006). To avoid this, authentic restaurants should have a genuine concept and give customers a realistic image of their authentic concept (Govers & Go, 2004). Authenticity is highly related to brand essence, the very being of anything, whereby it is what it is (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Locke, 1991). Customer authenticity perception influences brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, enhancing brand loyalty and finally brand choice intention (Lu et al., 2015). Authenticity depends on the degree to which a feature forms the essence (Van Rekom, Jacobs, Verlegh, & Podnar, 2006). Thus, the more essential a feature is, the more that feature is perceived to be authentic and, subsequently, the more it is liked (Van Rekom et al., 2006). The essence of a brand is created by the most essential features that are crucial for creating and keeping brand equity (De Chernatony, 2001; Keller, 1993). Essential features can impact other characteristics in the perception of the customer, whereas peripheral features cannot (Asch, 1946). Determining the essential and peripheral features and examining the cohesion between them can provide insights into the mind of the customer (Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980; Chater & Oaksford, 2006).

Table 1. Features of restaurant authenticity according to the literature.

Researchers	Features of authenticity according to the literature
Hughes (1995); Reisinger and Steiner (2006)	<i>Specification of dishes adapted to local preferences</i>
Hughes (1995); Muñoz, Wood, and Solomon (2006)	Ancient traditional dishes
Bendix (1997); Hughes (1995); Weber, Heinze, and DeSoucey (2008)	Ingredients associated with ethnic origin
	Dishes with homegrown or locally produced food
	<i>Stereotyped aspects</i>
Beardsworth and Bryman (1999); Muñoz et al. (2006); Wherry (2006); Wood and Munoz (2006)	Design of restaurant associated with the expressed culture
Beardsworth and Bryman (1999)	Restaurant associated with the expressed culture
Grandey and Brauburger (2002); Weber et al. (2008)	Employees associated with the expressed culture
Beardsworth and Bryman (1999); Muñoz et al. (2006); Wood and Munoz (2006);	Music associated with the expressed culture
Wherry (2006)	Atmosphere through cultural values and people
	<i>Communication of menu (name of dish)</i>
Hughes (1995)	Name of dish associated with specific place, ethnic personality or event
Hughes (1995)	Use of dialect
Hughes (1995)	Natural ingredients mentioned in name of a dish
MacCannell (1973); Weber et al. (2008)	<i>Communication of cooking procedures</i>

Therefore, authenticity can be studied by distinguishing between essential and peripheral features. Table 1 shows features of restaurant authenticity found in the literature.

Standardisation

Standards are increasingly being used in service sectors, and can contribute to service innovations (De Vries & Wiegmann, 2017). Standardisation can be defined as:

the activity of establishing and recording a limited set of solutions to actual or potential matching problems directed at benefits for the party or parties involved, balancing their needs and intending and expecting that these solutions will be repeatedly or continuously used, during a certain period, by a substantial number of parties for whom they are meant. (De Vries, 1997, p. 79)

General economic benefits of standards include network externalities, avoiding lock-ins, increased variety of systems and products, correction for adverse selection, reduced transaction costs, correction for negative externalities, economies of scale, building focus and critical mass and trade facilitation. The negative effects include the danger of monopolies, regulatory capture, reduced choice and market concentration (Blind, 2004). Inability and unwillingness to create and apply operational standards can be a cause of business failure. This applies to restaurants as well (Parsa et al., 2005).

Service standardisation assures safety, security, quality, durability and ease of use, thereby building customer confidence. Second, it facilitates the diffusion of accurate and appropriate information. Third, it supports access to a wide range of users and the development of varied choices. Furthermore, it provides appropriate and fair forms of redress where necessary (International Organization for Standardization/International Electrotechnical Commission [ISO/IEC], 2006). Standards for services may address a variety of topics (ISO/IEC, 2006): the service provider (e.g. quality management, environmental management, occupational health and safety management, solvency and other financial aspects, integrity, capacity, social responsibility, human resources), personnel

(e.g. knowledge, skills and competencies, attitude, training), suppliers (e.g. quality management), customers (e.g. minimum requirements for age, knowledge or skills, attitude or fitness), contract and billing, service delivery (e.g. specification of activities, trustworthiness, privacy, safety, health and hygiene, environmental aspects, code of conduct, security), service outcome (e.g. satisfaction, continual improvement), service environment (e.g. health and safety, accessibility), equipment (e.g. quality, safety, accessibility), safeguards (e.g. emergency measures, liability provision, guarantees, redress), communication between service provider and customer (e.g. method, content and frequency of interaction, approachability, attitude, code of conduct, customer satisfaction measurement) and intra-service organisational communication (frequency of interaction, shared information). We can distinguish between standards that describe a solution and standards that set performance requirements. In other words, standardisation does not imply uniformity and standards can be flexible (Van den Ende, Van de Kaa, Den Uijl, & De Vries, 2012) and can be revised repeatedly (Egyedi & Blind, 2008).

Authenticity and standardisation

Standardisation and authenticity seem to be opposite concepts. Authenticity may be associated with the past, standardisation is related to modernity (Cole, 2007; Ritzer, 1996). Commercialisation of local identities may lead to 'commodification' at the cost of this authenticity (Cole, 2007), causing homogenisation of experiences (Brown, 2012). Standardisation may include copying. Pine and Gilmore (2007) consider reproductions and recreations as of authentic features as fake and therefore not completely authentic. Grayson and Martinec (2004) distinguish between indexical and iconic authenticity. The former refers to something that is thought not to be a copy or an imitation, whereas the latter refers to an object or experience that resembles something that is indexically authentic such as authentic reproductions or recreations (Bruner, 1994).

Standardisation leaves little room for individuality and leads to conformity, and this is at the cost of (existential) authenticity (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006b). Modern people seek authentic experience to escape from their culture, but their demand leads to a service offer that becomes a commodity that is packaged and sold to the people, resulting in a loss of authenticity (Zhou, Zhang, Zhang, & Ma, 2015). Authenticity is an expression of quality and standardisation may increase productivity, but this can result in a role conflict for employees in service companies (Luria, Yagil, & Gal, 2014), reflecting the tension between flexible customised service offerings deployed through standardised processes (Rahikka, Ulkuniemi, & Pekkarinen, 2011). Their concept of service modularity allows us to unravel service offerings to the smallest service units, and these can be related to the above-mentioned standardisation topics listed by ISO/IEC (2006).

The paradox of authenticity versus standardisation has been studied by Zeng et al. (2012), using cases of restaurant groups in China. They show that any combination of the two concepts may contribute to expansion: standardised and authentic, authentic but not standardised, neither authentic nor standardised and both authentic and standardised. The latter combination is the most intriguing one. Authentic features are copied for each new subsidiary, leading to economies of scale and scope. In their case study, the company used standard food, developed a joint training programme for their chefs to prepare this food, and applied control measures to ensure that all restaurants met the

same standards for the food and its preparation. These findings form the starting point for our research design.

Research method

We investigate how the two concepts authenticity and standardisation can be combined to reap the benefits from both. For answering how-questions, case study research is an appropriate method (Yin, 2014). We take the case of an alliance of authentic top restaurants. Quality Lodgings (from now on referred to as QL) is a small-scale referral alliance of independently owned and operated hospitality firms. Generally, consumers perceive such restaurants as more authentic than non-family owned, generic multiple-category restaurants (Kovács et al., 2013). Our research differs from Zeng et al.'s (2012) study because it is more in-depth and investigates the perceptions of both entrepreneurs/managers and consumers to define the authenticity of restaurants for the common brand of different companies. Zeng et al. (2012) studied single companies with different subsidiaries. While QL covers hospitality firms in several European countries, this study concentrates on QL's outlets in the Netherlands.

We used the following sources: open-ended interviews with QL's managers and entrepreneurs (from now on referred to as 'executives'), a structured online consumer survey and observations of the brand governor. Both consumers and executives are the intended users of the essential features to be laid down in a common standard. The involvement of the members of a virtual consumer community would be a form of co-creation of value (Payne, Storbaka, & Frow, 2009). User involvement in standards development leads to better standards (Jakobs, 2006; Nakamura, 1993).

Restaurant managers and entrepreneurs

Our target population are executives of the QL association. The international alliance has 48 Dutch members, of which 43 own a restaurant. We used several rounds of interviews until they yielded negligible additional information. We conducted open-ended interviews (Harmsen & Jensen, 2004) to determine the perceived authentic features and to determine how these contribute to an authentic image from a business perspective. To help QL members structure their notions of authenticity, that is, to select determinant criteria, we started the interviews with three basic questions: (1) Do you consider your restaurant to be authentic? (2) Which restaurant features do you consider to be authentic? (3) Which restaurant features do you consider to be essential and which do you consider to be peripheral?

Subsequently, following Harmsen and Jensen (2004) and Grunert and Grunert (1995), we used the reversed laddering technique, which allowed the interviewees to rank order elements that represent their perception of restaurant authenticity. The 'laddered' line of questioning helped them to assess how restaurant features can be associated with the authenticity character of the QL brand. We used three types of questions embedded in the 'attributes-consequences-values chain' (Malhotra & Birks, 2007, p. 183): (1) Questions related to values were derived from the studies by Muñoz et al. (2006), Reisinger and Steiner (2006), and Weber et al. (2008). We aimed to generate as many features of restaurant authenticity as possible. If interviewees were unable to

describe the concept of authenticity or if their description did not fit the line of inquiry set out by the study protocol, the researchers intervened by verbal prompting to help them to describe the authenticity concept, in line with our definition: the ‘real thing’, which imbues a personal identity to an object, culture or person. (2) Questions related to consequences were derived from studies by Barsamian and Hammar (2008), Beardsworth and Bryman (1999), Cooke (1997), Grandey and Brauburger (2002), Muñoz et al. (2006), Weber et al. (2008), Wherry (2006) and Wood and Munoz (2006). These questions invited respondents to express their images and expectations about how the features relate to their restaurant’s authenticity. We continued to ask questions using prompts, where appropriate, until we obtained the needed responses. (3) Questions related to features were derived from studies by Hughes (1995) and Weber et al. (2008). These questions invited respondents to rank the importance of each feature that makes a restaurant ‘authentic’, for example, how the menu and its cooking procedures function as communication attributes. The questioning took on the form of an unbiased conversation, best qualified as open-ended interviews.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Coding was used, focusing on the specific features of restaurant authenticity. We tabulated how often respondents mentioned specific features and awarded twice the normal weight to the responses that were not prompted. Subsequently, we ranked the restaurant authenticity features on decreasing essentiality.

Customers

To gain insight in the customer perspective of authenticity, we compiled a 32-item questionnaire. We used the 12 features listed in Table 1 to generate the respondents’ opinion of authenticity in general. In some cases, we asked more than one question about a feature. For example, for the feature related to the design of the restaurant, we asked about the interior and the exterior of the restaurant in two separate questions. This resulted in a total of 18 questions.

For each of these, we measured two aspects: the extent to which they see this it as a constituting element of authenticity, and their appreciation. For example, the first statement read ‘A restaurant is authentic if it serves dishes prepared according to traditional recipes’. The second statement related the same feature to preference: ‘I like dishes prepared according to traditional recipes’. We used a five-point Likert scale with answers ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. Additionally, we asked eight other questions – about the consumer’s appreciation of dining in an authentic restaurant, about information sources used for selecting a restaurant, and about personal characteristics such as gender and age.

Our sample population comprised (potential) restaurant customers, aged 18 and above, drawn from the www.dinnersite.nl database, an online gastronomic community providing a forum to share opinions about 12,000 restaurants. The population size is unknown but it is expected to be substantially below 1,000,000 (the Netherlands has a population of 17 million inhabitants). The site has a database of visitors who receive news messages, and a subset of these had indicated to be willing to occasionally take part in research. We found our respondents from this subset. In the case of unknown group size, Krejcie and Morgan (1970) indicate 384 respondents are needed. After a pretest conducted among

15 respondents, we distributed the electronic questionnaire. During the pretest, we encountered some problems with the Dutch translation of the English questions. As a result, we had to rephrase some of the Dutch questions.

Results

Restaurant managers and entrepreneurs

Out of the 43 QL Alliance members with a restaurant, 30 restaurants were approached for an interview. We managed to arrange interviews with 13 of these, five entrepreneurs and eight restaurant managers. Interviews with restaurant managers took approximately three-quarters of an hour, the interviews with entrepreneurs were longer. The transcripts were coded independently by two researchers. Responses offered without prompting received one point, those offered with prompting half a point. These were listed based on decreasing totals. If the scores were the same, they were listed alphabetically.

The managers and entrepreneurs (from here on: 'executives') ranked 'personal attention' to the guest and 'well-behaved employees' as essential features of authenticity (Table 2). They characterised this as caring behaviour focused on value co-creation by being polite, greeting and seating guests, placing the napkin on the guest's lap, handling complaints appropriately, being honest to the guests, explaining the menu and providing appropriate service. They also mentioned the importance of face-to-face interpersonal contacts and making guests feel comfortable, for example, by recognising them from earlier visits and recalling their preferences.

The interviewees identified nine peripheral features they considered to be relevant for restaurant authenticity that were not mentioned in the literature (marked+ in Table 2): 'good food quality', 'making regular changes to the menu', 'combining tradition and modernity', 'rural rustic surroundings', 'offering a consistent concept', 'small restaurant', 'own style', 'management information system' and 'offering memorable dishes that people will recall in future'. Thus, the qualitative phase generated two essential and nine peripheral features for potential contribution to perceived restaurant authenticity.

Customers

Five hundred and twenty-two consumers answered the questionnaire. As many respondents had skipped one or more questions, we discarded any questionnaires that had two or more missing answers (casewise deletion, following Malhotra and Birks (2007). This resulted in a sample of 388 respondents. If one answer was missing, we used the average rating for that question. In this way, the mean value of the variable is unchanged, and other statistics such as correlations are not affected much, but it leads to an underestimation of the standard deviation (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Men were over-represented (60% men, 40% women ($z = 3.94$, $p < .01$). In comparison to the Netherlands' total population, the sample shows significant differences with respect to the relatively 'high education' level ($K = 0.48$, $p < .05$), age of the respondents ($K = 0.12$, $p < .05$) and above-average income levels ($K = 0.30$, $p < .05$) (CBS, 2009). These features are probably interrelated. Many people with a low level of education may simply lack the money to go out for dinner, and many people with a high level of education may have a higher

Table 2. Features of restaurant authenticity according to managers/entrepreneurs.

Features of authenticity	No. of restaurant managers		No. of entrepreneurs		Total of points awarded
	Mentioned spontaneously	Mentioned with help of researchers	Mentioned spontaneously	Mentioned with help of researchers	
Personal attention to guests	8	–	5	–	13
Well-behaved employees	7	1	5	–	12.5
Good food quality (+)	7	–	5	–	12
Making regular changes to menu (+)	7	–	4	–	11
Combining tradition and modernity (+)	7	–	3	–	10
External façade	6	2	3	–	10
Making guests feel at home and entertaining them	5	–	4	–	9
Rural, rustic surroundings (+)	5	–	4	–	9
Attractive food presentation	4	1	4	–	8.5
Offering a consistent concept (+)	5	–	3	–	8
Small restaurant (+)	3	–	4	–	7
Using ingredients associated with expressed culture/local suppliers	3	3	2	1	7
Restaurant name associated with culture	2	3	–	4	5.5
Open kitchen		4	–	5	4.5
Own style (+)	2	–	2	–	4
Management information system (+)	2	–	2	–	4
Interior design associated with culture	1	4	–	–	3
Offering memorable dishes that people will recall in future (+)	1	–	1	–	2
Name of dishes on the menu associated with culture	–	2	–	2	2
Employees interest associated with culture	–	–	1	1	1.5
Music associated with culture	–	2	–	1	1.5

Note: +, feature not mentioned in the literature.

income and thus go to restaurants and also visit the Dinnertime website more often. Moreover, our respondents are from the subset willing to cooperate in research and this may cause a further bias towards higher educated people.

We measured some of the variables using more than one question. The construct 'menu' consists of three items. The Cronbach's alpha of these items was 0.84. If one item is deleted, the alpha does not increase. The constructs 'well-behaved employees' and 'interior' were measured with two items. The Cronbach's alphas of these items were 0.85 and 0.75, respectively.

The level of authenticity a respondent awarded to a restaurant feature was compared with the extent to which the same respondent liked that specific feature. To compare

Table 3. Consumer rating of restaurants authenticity features.

Restaurant feature	Mean rating of importance for authenticity (range 1–5)
Traditional recipes	3.71
Local ingredients	3.71
Interior	3.40
Employees associated with culture	3.35
Music	3.32
Restaurant name	3.24
Personal contact	3.24
External façade	3.23
Well-behaved employees	3.22
Homely feeling	3.13
Menu	3.07
Homegrown or home-produced products	2.82
Employee language	2.66
Open kitchen	2.61

these two values, we used the Pearson correlation coefficient, because it shows whether there is a linear relationship between two quantitative variables (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). We found a positive relation between the level of authenticity awarded to the features of a restaurant and how much the respondents liked these features. The strength of these relationships differed among the features. We found the strongest relationships for ‘restaurant name’, ‘names of dishes’, ‘employees associated with culture’, ‘employee language’, ‘interior design’, ‘external façade’, ‘music’, ‘homegrown or home-produced products’ and ‘use of traditional recipes’ ($0.59 \leq r \leq 0.78$, $p \leq .01$).

Table 3 presents the mean values of consumer scores on the statement ‘A restaurant is authentic if ...’, ordered from high to low. We identified two salient constructs ($p < .01$) with a mean of 3.71: ‘traditional recipes’ and the use of ‘local ingredients’.

Towards a standard for authenticity

The results of the interviews show that the restaurant executives emphasise providing good service. This is a somewhat vague concept, but we can define it by adopting the SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1991), which was adapted by Namkung and Jang (2008). Their findings resemble the description of good service provided by the interviewees. According to Namkung and Jang (2008), the service provider should be reliable, responsive, provide assurance and show empathy for a service encounter to be good in the customer’s perception. Our interviewees named food quality as an aspect of authenticity. The combination of tradition and modernity was also seen as a feature of authenticity, since it breathes the traditional atmosphere, but can be adapted to modern guests. Wang (2007) describes this as customised authenticity. In a way, every restaurant is authentic to a certain extent, but the level of authenticity can differ in the eyes of the customers. In their eyes, authenticity has to fit their cultural norms, which means that a restaurant does not have to be genuine, but can be authentic when it is adjusted to the community. This is also named customised authenticity.

Our interviews with restaurant executives produced different findings than depicted in the literature review (Table 1). Nine out of the 21 authenticity features mentioned by restaurant executives (Table 2) are not mentioned in the literature (Table 1): ‘making regular changes to the menu’, ‘good food quality’, ‘combining tradition with modernity’, ‘small

restaurant', 'offering a consistent concept', 'own style', 'management information system', 'offering memorable dishes' and 'rural, rustic, surroundings'. Researchers tended to focus more on the physical and visible features.

Customers tended to emphasise the importance of food-related features of restaurant authenticity. This is partly in line with the review of authenticity research (Table 1), which refers to tangible matters such as preferences for local ingredients, name of dishes and cooking procedures. In contrast, the business perspective seems to focus on immaterial features. This gap between the business and the customer perspective can lead to customer sacrifice (Pine & Gilmore, 2000), because some of the features that were considered to be important by customers were not judged important by restaurant executives. In other words, to drive down customer sacrifice, executives need to listen to the needs and wishes of their customers more carefully.

Essential features of authenticity

Customers considered 'traditional recipes' and 'local ingredients' as most important features of authenticity. Restaurant executives apparently do not agree that traditional recipes are a feature of authenticity. They use traditional recipes, but adapt them to modern society. Since customers often lack knowledge about the original recipes, they could perceive the adapted version as traditional and authentic in its own way. Because customers as well as academic researchers rated 'traditional recipes' important to authenticity, we classify this as an important authenticity feature. Both restaurant executives and customers ranked the use of local ingredients as an important feature of authenticity.

Restaurant executives rated 'personal attention to guests' and 'well-behaved employees' as the most important for creating authenticity. Although customers mentioned these two features, they did not rank them as important. Perhaps they do not recognise this special treatment and just take it for granted. However, they might miss it if it is not available. If customers are consciously aware of this special treatment, they might also consider this as important. We classify 'personal attention to guests' and 'well-behaved employees' as important features of authenticity.

Peripheral features of authenticity

The authenticity features in Table 3 include 'interior', 'employees associated with culture', 'music', 'restaurant name', 'personal contact', 'external façade', 'well-behaved employees', 'homely feeling' and 'menu'. Restaurant interior and the fact that employees should be associated with the expressed culture are also mentioned in the literature. However, restaurant executives do not agree – they do not consider these two features to be relevant for authenticity. Customers and executives agree about the importance of giving a restaurant a name and an external façade that can be associated with the expressed culture, and about the importance of making customers feel at home. However, they disagree about the importance of using homegrown or home-produced products. Customers consider this feature less important than executives.

Some of the features considered to be important by executives are not mentioned in the literature, and therefore customers were not asked to rank these. One of these features is refreshing the menu regularly, and executives ranked it as moderately important. Their

restaurants serve dishes with local and fresh ingredients and use seasonal products. Executives ranked 'rural, rustic surroundings' and 'external façade' to be only moderately important to authenticity. Since customers also ranked 'external façade' to be moderately important, we have classified this feature as moderately important to authenticity. 'Offering a consistent concept' was mentioned by eight restaurant executives. Since authenticity as such presupposes a consistent concept, we do not consider this to be a feature of authenticity, but as a necessary condition for authenticity.

Figure 1 shows the essential and peripheral features that are relevant to authenticity in our case. A focus on the essential features gives QL members the best opportunity to achieve competitive advantage based on economies of scale derived from the inter-organisational exchange of knowledge, experience and competences. Accordingly, adopting standardised authenticity provides clarity to the QL Board and to QL members as to the minimum standards representing the 'entry barrier' for potential new alliance members. The features 'traditional recipes', 'local ingredients', 'personal attention to guests' and

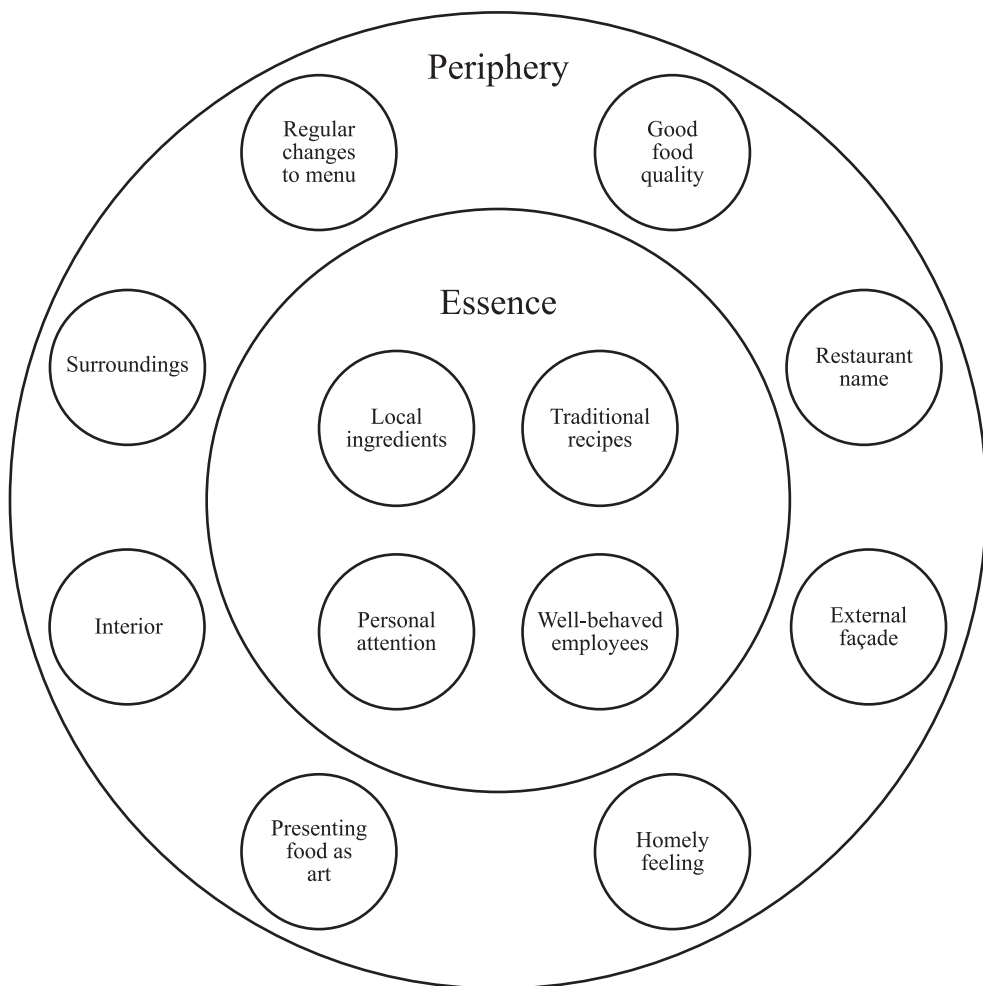


Figure 1. Essential and peripheral features of restaurant authenticity in QL alliance restaurants.

'well-behaved employees' should meet a minimum quality level. This level is likely to depend on several factors. An investigation into these factors is beyond the scope of this study. QL members should determine a minimum quality level for both essential and peripheral features to strengthen their authentic identity and to create a unique service package.

Discussion

Most consumers appreciate authenticity, but companies also value standardisation because it allows them to reduce cost. In other words, they would prefer to combine the two concepts. Our literature review suggests an inherent tension. Standardisation affects authenticity. However, these studies presume that standards lead to uniformity of products, services and processes, but standardisation literature has taught us that this is not necessarily the case – performance standards allow freedom in how to meet requirements. To explore the combination of authenticity and standardisation, we therefore investigate the feasibility of performance requirements for essential authenticity features of restaurants.

Stakeholders may have their own ideas about authentic features (Zhou et al., 2015). Here we take the perspective of academic researchers, restaurant executives and restaurant customers. Indeed, we found contradictory perspectives. The literature values the visible authentic features of a restaurant most. Customers appreciate the use of 'traditional recipes' and 'local ingredients' as core authentic features. Executives consider 'well-behaved employees' and 'personal attention' as main authentic features. In terms of Wang (1999), consumers emphasise objective authenticity and relate it primarily to the food. This confirms the conclusion of Chhabra (2010, p. 805): 'discourses and debates pertaining to objective authenticity might be exhausted or saturated in academic literature; but the demand for objective authenticity exists and will continue to prevail'. Our research does not reveal if consumers can distinguish objective and constructive authenticity. Anyhow, 'they develop their own interpretations of authenticity even if they are not familiar with the objective criteria of a specific culture and how the authentic cultural cuisine or experience should be' (Lu et al., 2015, p. 37). The companies all position themselves as authentic and in that sense they construct authenticity, but remarkably there is limited overlap between the literature and customer perceptions about restaurant authenticity. For our restaurant executives, authenticity means high quality. In terms of Wang (1999), they aim to offer existential authenticity. In this sense, these different definitions of authenticity are not just an issue for academic debate, but also for a proper balance between supply and demand in a service market. It now seems that this proper balance can be found by relating object authenticity 'to existential authenticity in hosts' (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006b, p. 311), resulting in 'negotiated authenticity' (Chhabra, 2010).

Respecting the differences in emphasis and seeking commonalities, a standard for authentic restaurants can be developed. This can lead to benefits such as economies of scale (e.g. common marketing communications), while maintaining flexibility by meeting performance requirements rather than implementing common solutions and by applying a set of selected peripheral features. In this sense, authenticity is 'constructed' (Grayson & Martinec, 2004).

This way of aligning the perspectives of executives, consumers and those expressed in the literature to establish core features of restaurant authenticity is new. These features

may characterise a common brand. The basic form of the model of restaurant authenticity as shown in [Figure 1](#) can be applied to all restaurant alliances. However, the set of essential features is expected to be case-specific. The features in [Figure 1](#) are specific for the QL case, and probably generally apply to upscale restaurants in the Netherlands such as those that are part of the Alliance Gastronomique. In other countries, consumers and restaurant executives may consider other features to be more important. The same may be true for restaurants with a specific profile (e.g. ethnic restaurants (Wang & Mattila, 2015)). Other factors, such as mission statement, choice of market segment(s) and business focus (product leadership, operational excellence or customer intimacy (Treacy & Wiersema, 1993)) are likely to affect the set of essential and peripheral features and the minimum quality level. For example, a fast food restaurant has different employee behaviour requirements than a fine dining restaurant – the former tends to focus on operational excellence, whereas the latter tends to focus on customer intimacy. Therefore, more case studies in other market segments and other cultures are needed to explore commonalities among essential features.

The dearth of literature on essential features of restaurant authenticity justifies the present research. A standard to define common features of authenticity should specify performance requirements rather than common solutions. Thus, it does not affect authenticity, but nevertheless creates a common image. Restaurants can share knowledge, develop common training programmes and cooperate in other ways. This results in economies of scale both through joint marketing activities and via more efficient operations. Our approach enables alliance members to distinguish between essential and peripheral authenticity features that create benefits such as achieving economies of scale or generate a sense of entrepreneurial independence through creative expression, for example, in culinary craftsmanship. When customers perceive several features of authenticity in a restaurant, they seem to like these features. This might mean that customers will appreciate the restaurant even more if it increases its level of authenticity. In other words, increasing levels of authenticity could be a way to attract more customers.

Executives see authenticity and (high) quality as almost interchangeable concepts. Then all other elements distinguished by ISO/IEC (2006) could be included in the standard because they can all be used to develop service quality. The literature suggests that this applies in particular to marketing communication. Kim and Jang (2016) found that highlighting authenticity in advertisements is effective in delivering authentic experiences.

Our research confirms the finding of Zeng et al. (2012) that the two concepts of authenticity and standardisation can be combined. Our data stem from more respondents and allow more constituting elements of authenticity to be distinguished. Moreover, Zeng et al. studied replication of authentic features within a single company, whereas we focus on performance standards for various companies. We show how a standard for authenticity can be developed, allowing companies to become more successful.

Our findings link the different approaches of authenticity found in literature (Taheri et al., 2017). The 'object' is not just a physical object. The supplier provides a service package consisting of tangible elements (e.g. food, furniture, building, employee outfit) and intangible elements (e.g. cooking process, employee behaviour). Our approach helps to distinguish all these constituting elements and to identify which of these are features of authenticity. The service package is constructed by the supplier who deliberately uses contemporary inputs and influences, but some elements may be arguably 'a true

image of the past' (Ram et al., 2016, p. 110), and this is what consumers expect when authenticity is claimed. They experience the service offer as a whole rather than the sum of its constituting elements, and this determines to what extent they experience existential authenticity. In the most extreme case, consumers can experience existential authenticity without any relation to objective authenticity (Yi, Lin, Jin, & Luo, 2016). But if there is such a relationship, the distinction between essential and peripheral features helps suppliers to understand which features are key to generate a consumer experience of authenticity. Consumers may have difficulty to fully express which features are essential for authenticity, and executives may have their own professional bias, so teaming up to determine the essential and the peripheral features definitely helps to define a relevant set of features: negotiated authenticity (Adams, 1996; Taheri et al., 2017). Zeng et al. (2012) observed how this can be done within a single company: determine the features and, in case of different outlets, replicate these. In our case, we set common performance criteria, allowing independent restaurants within an alliance to shape authenticity in their own way, while maintaining the agreed level of authenticity throughout the alliance.

Limitations and future research

We focused on the top segment of restaurants. Other restaurant chain types can apply the basic model of restaurant authenticity shown in Figure 1, but the set of essential features will probably differ. Replication of the commonalities in the set of essential features would serve to overcome a number of research limitations in this analysis. First, due to a limited time span, we were unable to process the features mentioned by the restaurant executives into the customer survey. Therefore, respondents could neither rate these features nor define their perceived customer importance. In replication studies, these two parts of the research should be done sequentially.

Second, the business and customer perceptions on features of authenticity differ, but this may be related to their perception of the concept as such. We explained our definition of authenticity in the interviews with the executives and gave feedback if the interviewee seemed to interpret the term authenticity differently. However, this was not possible in the survey research. This implies that different views on authenticity could have affected our study results. Additional interviews with customers or focus group sessions would solve this problem.

Third, the survey research has several limitations. The advantage of using Dinersite is that we could target consumers that were interested in visiting restaurants. However, the profile of these consumers differs from that of the average consumer in the same country, and the group of people willing to participate in research probably deviates even more (i.e. high level of education). Interestingly, findings show that people with lower or medium vocational education appreciate authenticity more than respondents with higher vocational education or university background ($K = 0.48 > 0.07$ (critical value)). On average, Dutch consumers would value authenticity even more, given their lower level of education compared to our sample. We formulated two statements for each feature. We asked about the extent to which consumers perceived a feature to be authentic and then asked whether they appreciated this feature. This may have created a common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). A solution would be to have the two

aspects rated by different groups of respondents, but this would exclude the option of pair-wise comparison at individual level.

Fourth, our three sources of information (literature, entrepreneurs and consumers) were not related to specific restaurants. In new research, data about restaurant authenticity (both objective data such as having an open kitchen and subjective data such as consumer perception of the authenticity of staff behaviour) could be related to the restaurant managers' perception of which features constitute authenticity, their policy in shaping authenticity, consumer ratings of that restaurant's authenticity, consumer appreciation of the restaurant and consumer perception and appreciation of specific restaurant features. This would allow an analysis per restaurant and a cross-case analysis between restaurants. This could be done in cooperation with an alliance of restaurants with a profile of authenticity like QL, and then be replicated in other alliances in other countries. The latter would reveal to which extent the distinction between essential and peripheral features of authenticity is specific for certain countries or cultures.

Fifth, this study is 'pre-normative' (European Committee for Standardisation, 2005) in the sense that our research can be used by QL to develop a common standard. We did not draft such a standard ourselves. This would have required a standardisation process through action research, involving the restaurants and preferably also customers.

Conclusion

This paper investigates which elements constitute restaurant authenticity and if these can be standardised within a chain of restaurants to reap benefits of commonalities among the restaurants. Would such standardisation affect authenticity? We investigated this by developing a common standard for an alliance of top restaurants. The outcomes of the literature review, interviews with restaurant executives and a consumer survey show several discrepancies. The literature values the visible authentic features of a restaurant most, our business executives valued authentic service delivery as the most important, and our consumers valued authentic food features. Comparing these three data sources resulted in a distinction between essential and peripheral features of authenticity. This distinction can help to define a standard for restaurant authenticity. The standard should incorporate requirements for the essential features of authenticity, setting a minimum quality level. In this way, an alliance of restaurants can cope with the paradox of standardising authenticity, while reaping the benefits of both.

Recommendations

In line with the literature, our empirical findings suggest that customers who perceive restaurant authenticity features also appreciate them. Thus, hospitality operators who succeed in increasing their authentic service level are likely to bridge the service – satisfaction gap, match customer expectations and attract new customers. So it makes sense for restaurants to create a distinct image of authenticity. In the QL case, we recommend entrepreneurs in the restaurant business to emphasise authenticity by focusing on offering traditional recipes, by using local ingredients and by coaching employees to behave appropriately. For restaurant alliances in other countries and in other business concepts, the set of essential and peripheral features and the optimal performance level may

differ, so we cannot give this recommendation to each alliance. However, the approach to establish a set of essential features can be similar. Companies seeking a common standard for their business should focus on these essential features and set minimum compliance requirements. If all members meet these minimum requirements, the common brand (in our case: QL) will become stronger. To ensure compliance, the alliance should monitor its members by involving an external auditor or by applying peer review, that is, experts assessing each other and in doing so learn from each other (De Vries, Feilzer, Gundlach, & Simons, 2010).

We recommend alliance members to collaborate both at the interface with customers (i.e. joint marketing communications, and a common brand image) and in back-office activities (i.e. joint employee training, shared good practices, joint purchasing). In this way, the alliance can attract more customers and decrease costs due to economies of scale. However, there are also disadvantages of collaboration. For example, sharing information about suppliers of high-quality ingredients can have a downside. Although the restaurants collaborate, they are still competitors. Sharing information might affect the competitiveness of individual restaurants. Alliance members should outweigh the benefits of economies of scale and the importance of retaining a competitive advantage by being unique. The combination of authenticity and standardisation is promising. Most customers appreciate authenticity. A better understanding of restaurant authenticity can make restaurants even more authentic and can enhance customer satisfaction. A strong common profile helps to attract more customers. It makes sense for independent restaurants to form alliances with other restaurants and to join forces to counter-balance the franchise chains (Go & Appelman, 2001), thereby creating a marketing advantage compared to competitors who sell foodservice as a commodity (Hughes, 1995; Weber et al., 2008).

Policymakers may notice that enhancing authenticity may strengthen the restaurant sector. A further spinoff is that the use of local ingredients can cause more economic activity in the form of more (sustainable) horticulture and agriculture, which may include nursing species that are specific to the local area. This may protect the national heritage. Furthermore, local production shortens transport distances and thus reduces CO₂ emissions.

The findings of our study may also be used in other service contexts where an authenticity profile can be important, e.g. hotels (Wassler, Li, & Hung, 2015), wellness (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006a), Slow Food (Gaytán, 2004), guided tours (Overend, 2012), music festivals (Peterson, 1997) and urban planning (Olsson & Haas, 2013).

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